

## The Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts

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In this paper, texts from the first and second Korean Waves are content-analyzed in order to better understand the nature of their popularity. The text of the first wave is represented by eight Korean television serials popular in the recipient countries of the first Korean Wave, while the text of the second is the ten K-pop music videos most viewed on YouTube. The results show that the structures of appeal of the texts of the two phases are quite distinct from one another. The appeal of the first wave texts is based on symbolic pleasure, but that of the second lies on the imaginary. Korean television serials reflect Korean society and their global fans partake in and share Korean fantasies and dreams. K-pop is of the Lacanian imaginary and excludes the social; it may be its aspiration to avoid the symbolic and indulge in the imaginary plenitude that appeals to global fans of K-pop.

**Key Words:** Korean Wave, K-pop, Korean Television Serials

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## I. Introduction

Following a slump in the mid-2000s, the Korean Wave has recently revived. The term Korean Wave was coined in the media to describe the unprecedented popularity of Korean pop culture, especially television serials and films, in the Asian region starting in the 1990s. As the term testifies, the phenomenon took Asian audiences by surprise. There have been attempts by scholars as well as journalists to explain the phenomenon; some attributed it to the technological superiority of Korean productions such as attractive mise-en-scene and well-made music (Song, 2002; Hwang, 2003) or to engaging and touching plot (Park, 2001); others identified cultural factors such as “cultural proximity” between Asian countries mediated by Confucian culture (Yu and Chung, 2000; Yu and Lee, 2001; Heo, 2002; Chai, 2003; Kim, 2004). Physically appealing casts have also been mentioned as a contributing factor. However, it lost its novelty value in the mid-2000s and appeared to taper off. It has resumed in recent years, rejuvenated by K-pop, which quickly caught the attention of world citizens. This so-called second (or new) Korean Wave is based on the popularity of K-pop, while at the same time supported by the lingering popularity of Korean television serials, films and games.

The second Korean Wave can be distinguished from the first in several respects. While the initial Korean Wave occurred mainly in the Asian region, the second wave has spanned other continents. The scope of the expansion of the second wave partly owes to the technology of diffusion. The first Korean Wave texts, which were mainly television serials and films, were broadcast on terrestrial and cable television and also distributed by means of CDs and DVDs (mainly illegally reproduced, except for in Japan). In contrast, the second Korean Wave text, K-pop, has been diffusing through social network services such as YouTube and Facebook. A further distinction between the first and second waves is the constitution of the audience. While the primary audience for the first wave was middle-aged and older women (Seo, 2011), that of the second is both males and females in their teens and twenties (Yang, 2011). (Even though the gender ratio

has yet to be reported, women are believed to compose the majority).

The phenomenon of both of these Korean Waves was unexpected. Prior to this phenomenon, Korean media had relied heavily on imported Western programs for their survival. Even though Korean popular culture products were fairly well-enjoyed within Korea, there was a large proportion of population who preferred imported western movies and television programs over domestic productions. Korean television serials and pop music were not known for particularly sophisticated production values and were often criticized for banality and lack of depth. That is why even Koreans are curious as to how Korean pop culture came to be received with such sudden enthusiasm. Of course, the quality of Korean pop culture products improved with the country's economic and technological development. However, it would require more than technological improvement to explain the popularity of the Korean Wave across borders.

In this paper, I will attempt to explore the structure of the appeal of Korean Wave texts from the two phases — television serials in the first and music videos in the second — by delineating the psychological, aesthetic, and ideological nature of each text which attract people and afford them pleasure and then comparing the two phases. I am particularly interested in learning whether the appeal of the second wave demonstrates an identical structure to the first. In other words, I would like to ask if the popularity of the second wave text is based on the same pleasures and ideology of the first and, therefore, if the second Korean Wave is an extension of the first. If not, what does the consecutive popularity of the two different texts suggest? Despite the two texts being drawn from different genres, a comparison is made possible by employing the formalist and psychoanalytic methodology.

## **II. Brief History of the Korean Waves**

The first Korean Wave began in the mid-1990s, with the export of Korean television serials and films to Asian countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, and peaked in the early 2000s with its expan-

sion to Japan. However, it declined after 2006 as the rate of increase of broadcasting exports began to slow in Chinese-speaking Asian countries. The main reasons behind the decline seem to be twofold: one was discontent on the part of the importing countries with the influx of Korean broadcasting programs and a resulting state intervention into the import of Korean broadcasting programs through establishing import quotas (Kwon and Kim, 2009). The other was shrinking interest on the part of the program importers in Korean programs, triggered by rising prices and their customers' fatigue with repetitive plots and characters.

However, while the death of the Korean Wave was speculated, it did not completely flatten out. Another Korean Wave surfaced from 2009 when young Korean pop groups first became conspicuous on global forums such as YouTube, Facebook and the U.S. Billboard charts. Even prior, there had been sporadic attempts by Korean performers such as BoA, Rain and Wonder Girls to penetrate foreign markets. By 2010, a number of K-pop groups such as Girl's Generation, Big Bang, and TVXQ had made inroads into the Billboard and Oricon charts, and most significantly into YouTube. In 2011, a series of K-pop concerts attracted hundreds thousands of loyal fans in global cultural centers such as New York, Paris, Tokyo, and Bangkok. In addition, Korean Wave fan clubs can be seen to include several million members drawn from all over the world (Jung, 2011). Outside K-pop, Korean television serials continue to be shown in original Korean Wave recipient countries and continue advancing into new territories such as the Middle East, central Asia, Latin America, and Africa. One of the most recent participants is France, where more than 20 internet sites provide K-pop and K-television serials accompanied with translation into 15 to 17 languages (Yang, 2011).

### **III. Methodology**

The texts of the first Korean Wave are television serials that were popular abroad. During the initial Korean Wave, numerous Korean

television serials were exported. While each importing country has its own list of preferred serials, a handful of them were widely popular across borders. Many of these same serials are still enjoying popularity in the new territories of the second Korean Wave. These all-time popular serials can be considered representatives of the first Korean Wave texts. To identify such texts, I drew upon the results of two surveys performed in 2003 and 2007 in major Asian recipient countries of the first Korean Wave. In 2003, the Korea Tourism Organization conducted a Korean Wave survey in Taiwan, China and Hong Kong asking people which they considered to be the most impressive Korean television serials. The most frequently mentioned were, in order of popularity, *Autumn Tale*, *Winter Sonata*, *All about Eve*, *Soonpoong Clinic*, *Model*, *Bright Girl's Success*, *Wish Upon a Star*, *Beautiful Days*, *Hotelier*, *Doctors*, *My Love Potjui*, *Glass Slippers*, and *Fireworks*. In 2007, Fuji Television, a Japanese commercial broadcasting network, conducted a survey on popular Korean television serials.<sup>1</sup> The ten most popular dramas were *Autumn Tale*, *Winter Sonata*, *Beautiful Days*, *Hotelier*, *Stairways to Heaven*, *All In*, *Summer Scent*, *Sad Love Song*, *Lover in Paris*, and *Jewel in the Palace*. These survey results show that four titles from the 2007 survey overlap with those from 2003. Therefore, these four titles — *Autumn Tale*, *Beautiful Days*, *Hotelier*, and *Winter Sonata* — can be used as the definitive texts of the first wave. However, these four cannot account for all popular texts, due to the time gap between the surveys. Other well-received titles in the 2007 survey, *Stairways to Heaven*, *Sad Love Song*, *Lover in Paris*, and *Jewel in the Palace*, did not appear in the 2003 version since they were shown abroad only after 2003. However, these were reported to be extremely popular in Asian countries other than Japan (Kim, 2005). Therefore, I included these four titles in the list of popular Korean Wave serials. The complete list is shown in Table 1.

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1. The survey was performed with the program SmaStation among 1,500 men and women.

Table 1. Representative Texts of the First Korean Wave

Title	Year of Production	No of Episodes	Producer
Autumn Tale	1999	16	KBS
Beautiful Days	2001	24	SBS
Hotelier	2001	20	MBC
Winter Sonata	2002	20	KBS
Jewel in the Palace	2004	56	MBC
Stairways to Heaven	2004	20	SBS
Lover in Paris	2004	20	SBS
Sad Love Song	2005	20	MBC

The text of the second Korean Wave is K-pop. The analysis of K-pop should diverge from that of television serials due to the difference in genre. While the subject of the referral of the text of television serials is self-evident, that to which K-pop refers can be more flexible. While some would consider melody, rhythm and lyrics as text, others include dance routines, stage settings and even performers' appearances and fashion styling. In fact, the text of K-pop can include all of these elements. Therefore, it becomes logical to analyze K-pop music videos, which show all those components, as text. Since the bulk of K-pop stars earned their international fame through music videos on YouTube, the number of views of a video is a revealing criterion by which to judge its popularity. Ten music videos were chosen according to their number of views: the five most-viewed among those released between 2000 and 2009 and a second group of five from among those released in 2010 and 2011. The list is shown in Table 2.

Both the first and second Korean Wave texts will be analyzed according to their formal, thematic, and ideological characteristics. The formal characteristics are to be addressed in the discussion of shots, mise-en-scene, editing, sound, and more and the thematic with that of subject, plot, and characterization. While formal and thematic characteristics can explain important aspects of the appeal, the discussion of the two will eventually be incorporated into the analysis of the ideological, which is expected to reveal the psychological function of the Korean Wave texts. The ideological will be discussed through the

Table 2. Representative Texts of the Second Korean Wave

Title	Year of Release	YouTube Views <sup>†</sup> (Ranking)	Performers
Gee	2009	64,076,967 (1)	Girl's Generation
Nobody	2009	55,956,241 (2)	Wonder Girls
Sorry, Sorry	2009	34,197,228 (3)	Super Junior
Lollipop	2009	33,250,654 (4)	Big Bang / 2NE1
Ring Ding Dong	2009	30,853,081 (5)	SHINee
Oh	2010	47,466,820 (1)	Girl's Generation
Run Devil Run	2010	35,061,251 (2)	Girl's Generation
Mr. Simple	2011	34,474,359 (3)	Super Junior
Bonamana	2010	33,547,189 (4)	Super Junior
I'm the Best	2011	30,882,906 (5)	2NE1

\* Source: <sup>†</sup> ([http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6BADB0021AAEFED7&feature=plcp], for titles released between 2000 and 2009), ([http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL454D6B28F120AB14], for titles released between 2010 and 2011).

Lacanian concept of the symbolic and imaginary. The symbolic and imaginary are two elements of the Lacanian triad explaining human psychology in relation to the social and being. The symbolic order is the field of the law, culture, and language, through which an individual understands and adapts to society. The imaginary is the stage prior to the formation of ego and gives one the illusion of “wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and similarity (Evans, 1996: 82).” Following these analyses, the structure of the appeal of Korean Wave texts will be discussed by comparing and contrasting the texts of the two phases of the Korean Wave.

#### IV. Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts

##### A. The Korean Wave Television Serials

Korean Wave television serials share certain formal, thematic and ideological characteristics that appear to appeal to their fans. Most importantly, it was noted that the genre of Korean Wave serials can

generally be considered melodrama and they tend to faithfully follow generic conventions in those aspects such as plot, characterization, ideology, etc. (Lee, 2005). The ideological aspect is significant since through its rather long history the melodrama form has invariably emphasized ethical values (Brooks, 1976: 28). This ethical facet of melodrama influences the manners in which the dramas both establish and resolve conflicts, since the important function of conflicts is to transmit ethical messages. Therefore, in melodramas, the courses through which conflicts arise and are resolved follow a customary rather than logical path (Schatz, 1981: 30). In Korean Wave serials, conflicts are established related to love, family, or career and the way they are unraveled endorses goodness of human beings and a pure and sincere type of love. While these generic aspects and ideological messages are an important element of the appeal of Korean wave serials, a psychological mechanism also exists that consolidates the operation of the process of appeal. This mechanism is the dual provision of fantasy and lack. In the following, I will discuss the mechanisms of fantasy and lack. I will use these terms in both their commonsensical and psychoanalytic usages.

### **1. Fantasy**

The apparatus of the initial Korean Wave texts — Korean television serials — that draws in the audience is the structure of fantasy and lack. Fantasy here refers to wishful thinking regarding pleasant situations that are unlikely to occur in reality. The fantasies of Korean Wave television serials hinge on ideal love, ideal human relationships and ideal characters. These are the elements which make the world of Korean Wave serials so achingly beautiful.

Korean Wave television serials propagate an idealistic worldview in which the world is actually a rather agreeable place in itself, unless it gets entangled through uncontrollable incidents such as illness, accidents (mainly automobile accidents), switches of identity at birth, or the ill intent of villains. Love is the single most cherished value of Korean Wave serials. The love depicted in these serials is extremely



pure, loyal and immutable. No matter how unfavorable the circumstances may be, lovers adamantly adhere to their love. Commonly, the wealthy family of the female protagonist's lover pairs him with a rich and beautiful woman from within his own class. However, he does not offer her due attention. The protagonist herself is also loyal to her lover and the only reason one ever considers giving up on love is for the sake of her lover. For example, in *Lover in Paris*, the protagonist decides to leave her lover since his family threatens him with removal from his position within the family business. Love is the most important desire of the protagonists in those serials, and therefore an important motivation to impel the plot forward. The desires of the protagonist, who happens to be a woman in all eight cases, are often multiple: other than a desire for love, she also aspires to succeed in her career, reunite with or save her family, and more. Among such desires, the craving to accomplish love is the strongest. In this case, the desire for love grows stronger as a result of all the obstacles to its accomplishment. Logically speaking, love is difficult to realize here since it takes place between individuals from different classes, usually a woman from a humble family and an upper class man, leading the man's family not to accept their matrimony.

The family is always a hurdle to love. In *Autumn Tale*, the very family relationship itself precludes the realization of love since the protagonist loves a man who grew up as her brother, even though they actually lack a blood relationship. In *Lover in Paris*, the protagonist falls in love with a man whose rich father forbids him to marry her and instead introduces a rich woman who devises a series of tactics to separate them. In *Winter Sonata*, it is the lover's mother who does everything in her power to separate the pair. Love is always frustrated and delayed. Next to family, illness (*Beautiful Days*, *Winter Sonata*, *Stairways to Heaven*, *Sad Love Song*), the plotting of rivals (*Lover in Paris*) and other misfortunes (*Hotelier*, *Jewel in the Palace*) stand as impediments to love. The difficulties in realizing love end up confirming the importance of love. The more difficult it is to actualize love, the more desperately the audience craves its realization.

Love is not the sole fantasy in the serials, however. The depiction

of idealistic human relationships creates fantasy, as well. The human relationships include relationships between family members, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and others. While human relationships are depicted across multiple permutations, they all conform to a belief in the goodness of human nature. In particular, relationships between family members are portrayed as the foundation for the true happiness of the protagonist. This explains why even when the family serves as an obstacle to love, lovers never abandon their families. In the world of Korean television serials, the family is an idealistic institution. For example, in *Autumn Tale*, *Winter Sonata* and *Jewel in the Palace*, we witness the model of the happy family: in the first, the protagonist's first family was flawless, everyone was happy, and all the relationships — between husband and wife, parents and children and between siblings — were positive. This applies to the second and third serials as well, despite the premature death of the father in the second and the family's politically unstable status in the third.

The sacredness of both love and the family often forces a character to choose one over the other, especially the protagonist's rich lover often finds himself in this situation. He cannot truly abandon either, since despite a cold appearance he is actually very attached to his family. Finally, the serial provides a solution for reconciling one with the other, which always relies on coincidences, accidents or illnesses. In this way, the accomplishment of love also leads to the achievement of a happy family.

The third fantasy surrounds idealized masculinity and femininity. The protagonists of the Korean Wave dramas are the incarnation of masculine and feminine ideals. The male and female protagonists are highly stereotypical: males possess economic, intellectual and physical competence and power, along with psychological determination, and above all charisma. They are commonly professionals from rich families. They are decisive, courageous and trustworthy and basically embody the image of the ego ideal of Korean culture. Ego ideal à la Lacan is the image of a father formed at the time of the conclusion of the Oedipus complex. It is the internalization of the symbolic order and reflects the culture's masculine values (Evans, 1996). Of course,

masculine ideals are diverse, and therefore distinct masculine ideologies can coexist within a society. In Korean society, the most prevalent masculine ideal is considered a man's economic and intellectual potential (Park, 2010: 5). On the other hand, there has been an emerging demand for a more sensitive, warm and gentle masculinity, especially on the part of women. The male protagonists of the Korean Wave dramas combine the twin types of masculine idealism. They incarnate the powerful and at the same time gentle and sensitive, and sometimes even sacrificing, father.

On the other hand, female protagonists are the manifestation of idealistic femininity. They are good, faithful, kind, patient and also cheerful. They can be persistent, assertive and competent in pursuing their careers and courageous as well when protecting and rescuing their families. However, in terms of love, they are passive and even self-denying. They reflect Korean culture's preference for sexual purity in women. This trait of purity is visually reinforced. The actresses who portray the female protagonists in Korean Wave serials are seen as the pure and fresh image type. They are never sex goddesses. They are described as being so perfectly lovely, and genuinely good that they cannot help being loved. This characteristic of the female protagonist positions them as Lacanian *objet petit a* (object small a). *Objet petit a* is an imaginary, unobtainable object, and both the object and cause of desire. When we fall in love with someone, we believe we love that person; however, what we really desire is the object small a in that person. As long as *objet petit a* is something that triggers our desire, we can witness its personification in those much-desired female protagonists.

The fantasy aspect of Korean Wave serials attracts fans since it provides them with pleasure and comfort. While love and family remain the most important desires of human society, in reality they are illusory and rife with problems. The Korean Wave serials provide the audience with the illusion of perfect love and family without really having to change reality. On the other hand, masculinity and femininity are significant elements of human identity. People strive to achieve ideals of masculinity or femininity in order to enjoy high self-esteem.

Korean Wave serials allow the protagonist to have all these desires and, by identifying with them, people are able to forget, no matter how briefly, their frustrations with reality.

## 2. Lack

As explained so far, fantasy is an omnipresent element in Korean Wave serials. However, fantasy alone cannot explain their appeal. Fantasy can be too idealistic and unreal for an audience with experience of this imperfect world. The universe of Korean Wave serials includes the element of “lack” which brings it more in line with reality. Lack is an indispensable element of Korean television serials that completes the discourse of love. The lack lies within the most powerful character — the male protagonist. Male protagonists, despite their powerful outward appearance, possess some critical wound, commonly inflicted by an illegitimate birth and/or absence of parents (or one parent). In *Winter Sonata*, the male protagonist (portrayed by Bae, Yong-joon) grew up without a father as his mother conceived him out of wedlock. His mother does not reveal to him the identity of his father, and this absence of a father leads him to become a troubled and rebellious teenager despite being smart and competent. Likewise, the male protagonist in Korean Wave serials nearly always suffers from either the absence of a father or a conflict with him. The conflict with his father results from either the illegitimacy of his birth or his father’s own personal lack. In *Autumn Tale* where a male protagonist (played by Song, Seungwhan) does not have any problem with his parents, at least the other one (played by Won, Bin) does. This family-related lack leaves the male protagonist troubled and unwilling to reconcile with or be comforted by the world.

The fact that the male protagonist shows a troubled relationship with his own father or even that it is the father who has the lack while he himself displays the image of the ultimate father — the ego ideal — appears ironic. However, this lack on the part of the male protagonist accomplishes two important functions. One is the revelation of the lack in the big Other à la Lacan, in other words in the

symbolic order. The other function is to suggest the male protagonist's own lack, since his power and legitimacy are derived from his father. This structure of lack on the part of the male protagonist functions to facilitate the fantasy of love, since the discourse of love is completed only with the lack in the subject. A subject by its nature has a fundamental lack and "it is in this lack that one encounters the object cause of desire (Salecl, 1994: 22)." Love is how the subject deals with the lack, not only in him-or-herself but in the loved one who temporarily takes the place of the big Other. The serial provides a woman as a solution to fill the lack. The pure and faithful female protagonist is the only way to complete the lack. Therefore, the deeper the lack, the deeper his love for the woman becomes. The presence of the ego ideal, object petit a, and lack makes this a perfect discourse of love.

### **3. Symbolic Pleasure**

The fantasy created by Korean Wave dramas is of a symbolic nature. It basically conforms to social roles and expectations. The psychological reward of Korean Wave serials is for adults to experience vicarious satisfaction and comfort through the indirect experience of successful role playing. The world of the drama is filled with all the difficulties of life that adults must face in reality: relationships, love, career, and more. The fantasy in the serials lies in the miraculous resolution of such difficulties. The most prominent problems presented in the plots are love and family. The magic of Korean Wave serials hinges on their plot of establishing a conflict between the most cherished institutions and then solving the problem by miraculously reconciling them. The description of love creates a cherished fantasy since it leads us to believe that love is not what it really is: vicarious, mutable, and illusive. According to Lacan, love is only a mirage, since one does not actually love the other, but simply the object cause of desire in the other as represented by the object small a.

The serials have a tactful way of taking advantage of a lack in order to veil the ideology of love by using this lack. In other words, they attribute impossibility of love to this lack and by filling it, declare

that love is accomplished. The private nature of the problems may be the reason why more women than men become engrossed in Korean serials, since women are said to be more relationship-oriented. The women who become frustrated with the impossibility of love and difficulty of family relationships in real life may be comforted by ideal men and sublime love.

### *B. K-pop*

K-pop is a broadly inclusive category and is composed of heterogeneous texts. However, K-pop as a part of the Korean Wave shares a number of common characteristics. This K-pop is composed of not only songs, but dance as well and is mainly performed by groups. Also, there are thematic and formal characteristics commonly contained within K-pop. Since our object of analysis is K-pop music videos, I analyzed the theme, mise-en-scene, narrative, performance, music, representation of sexuality and dynamics between performers, among other elements, in order to discuss shared characteristics.

#### **1. Theme and Subject**

The most frequent theme in K-pop music videos is love. Eight out of the selected ten K-pop music videos revolve around romantic emotion. The remaining two are about a view on life (self-contentment, minimalism). The love songs narrate a naïve, childish love or the frustration of pursuing unrequited love. Despite the differences in themes, what all ten videos convey about the subject of the lyrics is his or her immaturity. The narrating subject is established as a young and innocent individual who marvels at the joy of first love or feels frustrated in the face of unreciprocated love. Even the life view themes reveal an immature mentality, either proclaiming the ease of life (*Mr. Simple*) or confirming the subject's superior femininity (*I'm the Best*).

## 2. Narrative and Mise-en-Scene

Narrative is not a prominent element in K-pop music videos. In the above ten K-pop music videos, narrative (other than that in the lyrics) is almost non-existent with the exception of two cases. In *Gee* and *Nobody*, the diegesis of the lyrics is framed in a simple narrative (in *Gee* manikins coming to life and having fun; in *Nobody* a singer daydreaming about girls performing *Nobody*). While narrative is not prominent, the lyrics and mise-en-scene serve as a form of substitute for it. The mise-en-scene reflects the mood of the lyrics and the performers act as the subject of the lyrics. As discussed above, the lyrics primarily represent teenage love. The setting is typically a closed space creating a world of teenage play and romance separated from that of adults and work. The space is either a colorful playroom (as in *Gee*, *Lollipop*, *Oh*) or a black and white enclosure created from high tech materials with a high ceiling and no decoration. The setting of *Ring Ding Dong* is occupied with cars, which signifies youth culture.

## 3. Sexuality

Sexuality in K-pop music videos is attenuated and often blurred as a form of cuteness. Flagrant sexuality does not agree with a K-pop world where naïve teenage subjects pine over unrequited love or flutter at the glimpse of the object of their passionate but one-sided love. Their physical appearances — extremely slim bodies, adolescent faces and teenage fashions — deny a full-blown sexuality. In particular, girl groups often emphasize their childishness and playfulness. On the other hand, they are often displayed as objects of a sexual gaze. Their sexually suggestive dances, gazes and facial expressions admit their status as sexual objects. The concurrence with their professed identity as teenagers and provocation of sexual desire has called for a debate on the Lolita complex.

#### **4. Group Dynamics**

As mentioned above, K-pop tends to be performed by groups. Every member of the group is treated equally and no one star performer is emphasized. This egalitarian group dynamic is accomplished principally through editing and choreography. The choreography of the dance is based on group movements, sense of harmony and coherence. The exact synchronization of acrobatic action is one of the primary attractions of K-pop. The editing also directs the audience's attention to the group dynamics by alternating long shots of the entire group with mid- and close-up shots of individual members. In this way, each member can be occasionally placed on a pedestal and fans can enjoy focusing on their favorite member of the group once in a while.

#### **5. Music**

The music itself of K-pop is eclectic, spanning hip hop, ballads, dance, rap, funk, and more, all accompanied by the same style of dance. The music is easy to listen to and follow and caters to popular tastes in recourse to catchy melodies and simple repetitions of the title, such as in "gee, gee, gee, gee." The function of the lyrics lies in not only conveying information, but also in creating playful sound which is fun to imitate.

#### **6. Performers**

The appeal of K-pop is as much visual as vocal. A good portion of its attraction is derived from not only the choreography of the dances, but also the performers themselves. The performers in K-pop are young people between their late teens and early twenties. They have facial and body types that today's youth, including K-pop fans (who are also mostly in their teens and twenties), globally prefer. The girls have very girlish, fair, delicate, fresh faces and tall, slim and well-shaped bodies. The boys have also pretty faces and well-muscled but



thin bodies. Their hairstyles, makeup and clothing cater to fan tastes.

### **7. Imaginary Pleasure**

K-pop music videos share certain characteristics beyond the fact that they are well made and have lofty production values. Their feel is playful, childlike, and at times dream-like. The diegesis of the music videos, if any, is not about competition, power, or dominance, but rather play, camaraderie, and love (although sometimes sad). The *mise-en-scene* greatly contributes to this ambience. The performers are shown on equal terms, no single one being in a prevalent position. Everyone is equally attractive on her or his own.

The popular K-pop music videos depict a world of youth immersed in romanticism and play. This world is walled off from the rest of the society, constituted only by youth and governed by a childish mentality. The young subjects (as embodied by the lyrics) are naïve and not very confident regarding their own attractiveness as members of their respective gender (or over-confident as in the case of *I'm the Best*, which is the flip side of being under-confident) and yearn for love with an ideal partner. They are suffering from growing pains, yet refuse to grow up. They remain narcissistically attached to their immaturity.

On the other hand, the visuals convey the message that they are highly attractive and physically competent. They are the incarnation of the ideal beauty and physical prowess of the present day. They dance effortlessly and without error. This combination of immature mentality and physical idealism seems to make up an important element of the appeal of K-pop. While the anti-charismatic aspect of the subjects allows the audience to feel comfortable with and connected to them, the actual beauty and physical competence of the performers makes them ideal models who the audience adores. In fact, this leads the audience to a Lacanian imaginary identification with the subjects and their world. Lacan explains the concept as a mechanism through which the ego is created in the mirror stage (between the age of 18 and 36 months) by identifying with the ideal image in the mirror

which is referred to as the “ideal ego (Evans, 1996: 81).” The ideal ego is imagined to encompass a full and complete capacity which a child of that age lacks. Therefore, the imaginary identification is narcissistic and does not conform to physical reality. This occurs prior to the introduction of the symbolic order (and coexists with the latter throughout life); it therefore does not have to account to the symbolic laws.

Although K-pop is a very different text from Korean Wave serials, the former also seems to rely on the element of fantasy for its appeal as does the latter. However, the nature of fantasy in K-pop is differentiated from that in the serials. Fantasy here lies in avoiding a social role. The characters desire to evade a grown-up’s role. They claim self-sufficiency in remaining immature. Their dichotomy suggested in the music videos is not between culture and nature as often found in many forms of art but between maturity and immaturity or responsibility and irresponsibility. Therefore, the appeal of the second Korean Wave texts — K-pop music videos — appears to be based on imaginary (à la Lacan) and narcissistic pleasure. It is the pleasure of lingering in a childish and irresponsible world without societal duties while still enjoying the pleasure of identifying with bodies which are idealistic and competent.

As shown so far, the two Korean Wave texts create dual unique worlds. While the first is of an ethical, logical, social, in other words symbolic, order, the second order is asocial, childish, and narcissistic, in other words, imaginary. The former offers an adult world and the second a teenage version. In the first, the audience is encouraged to identify with an idealized masculinity and femininity and discourse of love and by so doing to enjoy the pleasure of sublimation. In the second, they are lured to identify with an ideal body and its competence while remaining mentally immature and to thus withdraw into narcissistic pleasure. While both of them allow the audience to pursue fantasy, the mechanism of endorsing it is quite distinct. The first hypothesizes an idealistic social order and attributes the not very idealistic situations of the characters to their fate or misfortune. The second fabricates the self-sufficiency of the adolescent community,

which functions regardless of official social rules. To endorse their fantasies, the first overemphasizes lack, while the second hides or even denies it.

## V. Conclusion

If the phenomenon of the Korean Wave struck a large part of the world unexpectedly, it must have hit Koreans with surprise and not without some sense of nationalistic pride. Just as Koreans had been lagging behind in terms of realizing their economic accomplishment and newly acquired status, they have been rather oblivious to the development of their pop culture, which formerly occupied a second-class position to that of the West. However, this pride was sometimes tainted with claims of the lack of originality and unsustainability of Korean Wave. It has been asserted that Korean Wave serials replicate the Japanese television serials of the 70s and that K-pop cannot be considered original since many K-pop songs are the products of international cooperation. Above all, Koreans are rather confused about the true nature of its popularity. In actuality, many Koreans are not fans of Korean Wave and naturally do not understand the pleasure that can be derived from it. The popularity of Korean television serials was gendered and not endorsed by the full population, while that of K-pop is limited to young people (perhaps under 40 or even 30).

Despite such anti-Korean Wave remarks and its limited fandom, the content analysis presented in this paper shows that the Korean Wave actually derives much of its idiosyncrasy from Korean cultural characteristics. Especially, Korean television serials reflect Korean society and culture, perhaps not revealing Korea's reality but rather its fantasies and ideals. Hence, when global audiences show enthusiasm for Korean Wave serials, they partake in and share Korean fantasies and dreams. Since the fantasy of the Korean Wave serials is based on the Lacanian symbolic order, it spreads Korean values. Some international audiences may even go so far as to confuse fantasy with reality and create an idealized version of Korean society in their minds.

On the other hand, K-pop does not represent Korean society to such a degree, since the fantasy of K-pop is of the Lacanian imaginary and excludes the social. It may be rather the aspiration to avoid the symbolic and indulge in the imaginary plenitude that appeals to global fans of K-pop. Therefore, what the global fandom of K-pop reveals is the similarities of the youth culture at this current point in history. The function of K-pop seems not so much to be spreading Korean culture as to read the global trend into the structure of K-pop.<sup>2</sup> What Korean culture has contributed to the popularity of K-pop may be the very entrepreneurship in the pop music industry, which invented the management system through which the entrepreneurs elevate highly skilled singers and performers tailored to the tastes of a global audience.

However, we cannot underestimate the influence of Korean culture in either the first and second Korean Wave phenomenon. If it was the idiosyncrasy of Korean culture depicted in the Korean television serials which appealed to a global audience, it could have been the commonality of Korean culture with the rest of the world that appealed in the second Wave. The entrepreneurs of the second wave were able to identify aspects of Korean youth culture appealing to young people around the world. Fortunately for these efforts, the tide of globalization appears to have homogenized international youth culture to a point allowing it to accept internationally produced K-pop. What distinguishes the second from the first is the fact that the second was fabricated through entrepreneurial initiatives while the first occurred more or less on its own. The second was a product of both discovery of Korean pop culture's potential through the first and confident maneuver for its reap to the world leader. Perhaps it is rather the incidence itself of two Korean Waves of two very different

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2. In an interview, Suman Lee, president of the SM Entertainment and producer of Girl's Generation, TVXQ, BoA, and Super Junior among others, introduced a protocol of international cooperation in which as many as 50 worldwide composers can combine as a music camp to compose songs for his company (Lee, 2011).

texts within the timespan of two decades that reveals the uniqueness of Korean culture.

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